

POLLY of the CIRCUS

By MARGARET MAYO

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(CONTINUED)

"Why did you leave me as you did?" "I told you then." She tried to cross toward the dressing tent. He seized her small wrists and forced her to look at him. "And I am not happy without you, and I never, never can be." The flood-gates were open. His eyes were aglow. He bent toward her eagerly. "Oh, you mustn't!" she begged. "You've grown so close," he cried, "so close!" She struggled to be free. Life did not heed her. "You know, you must know, what I mean." He drew her toward him and forced her into his arms. "You're more precious to me than all else on this earth." For the first time he saw the extreme pallor on her face. He felt her growing limp and lifeless in his arms. A doubt crossed his mind. "If I am wrong in thinking you feel as I do, if you honestly care for all this," he glanced about at the tents, "more than for any life that I can give you, I



"Never mind, Bingo."

shan't interfere. You'll be going on your way in an hour. I'll say good-by and God bless you, but if you do care for me, Polly," he was pleading now, "if you're not happy here, won't you come back to me? Won't you, Polly?"

She dared not meet his eyes nor yet to send him away. She stood irresolute. The voice of Deacon Strong answered for her.

"So you're here, are you?" "Yes, Deacon Strong, I'm here," answered the pastor as he turned to meet the accusing eyes of the deacon. "As for you, miss," continued Strong, with an insolent nod toward Polly, "I might have known how you'd keep your part of the bargain."

"Bargain?" echoed Douglas. "What bargain?" "Oh, please, Deacon Strong, please, I didn't mean to see him—I didn't, truly." She hardly knew what she was saying.

"What bargain?" demanded Douglas. She told me that you and her wasn't ever going to see each other again," roared Strong. "If I'd known she was going to keep on with this kind of thing you wouldn't have got off so easy."

"So that's it!" cried Douglas. It was all clear to him now. He recalled everything—her hysterical behavior, her laughter, her tears. "It was you who drove that child back to this!" He glanced at Polly. The narrow shoulders were bent forward. The nervous little fingers were clasping and unclasping each other. Never before had she seemed so small and helpless.

"Oh, please, Mr. John, please don't make him any worse!" "Why didn't you tell me?" he demanded.

"It would have done no good," she sobbed. "Oh, why—why won't you leave me alone?"

"It would have done all the good in the world. What right had he to send you back to this?"

"I had every right," said Strong stubbornly.

"What?" cried Douglas.

"It was my duty."

"Your duty? Your narrow minded bigotry?"

"I don't allow no man to talk to me like that, not even my parson."

"I'm not your parson any longer," declared Douglas. He faced Strong squarely. He was master of his own affairs at last. Polly clung to him, begging and beseeching.

"Oh, Mr. John, Mr. John!"

"What do you mean by that?" shouted Strong.

"I mean that I stayed with you and your narrow minded congregation before because I believed you needed me. But now this girl needs me more. She needs me to protect her from just such injustice as yours."

"You'd better be protectin' yourself. That's my advice to you."

"I can do that without your advice."

"Maybe you can find another church with that circus ridin' girl a-bangin' round your neck."

"He's right," cried Polly. "You couldn't." She clung to the pastor in

terrified entreaty. "You couldn't get another church. They'd never, never forgive you. It's no use. You've got to let me go! You've got to!" "Listen, Polly." He drew her toward him. "God is greater than any church or creed. There's work to be done everywhere—his work." "You'll soon find out about that," thundered Strong. "So I will," answered Douglas, with his head thrown high. "This child has opened a new world to me. She has shown me a broader, deeper humanity. She and I will find the way together." "It won't be an easy one. I'll promise you that." Strong turned to go. "I'm not looking for the easy way," Douglas called after him; then he turned to draw Polly's arm within his, but Polly had slipped from his side to follow the deacon.

"Oh, please, Deacon Strong, please!" she pleaded. "You won't go away like that. He'll be all right if you'll only wait. I'm not coming back. I'm not—honestly. I'm going on with the show tonight, and I'm going this time for ever."

"You are going to stay here with me!" cried Douglas.

"No, no, Mr. John! I've made up my mind, and I won't be to blame for my unhappiness." She faced him bravely now. "I don't belong to your world, and I don't want to try any more. I'm what he called me—I'm a circus riding girl. I was born in the circus, and I'll never change. That's my work—riding—and it's yours to preach. You must do your work, and I'll do mine."

Polly was springing on to the back of Barbarian. He was a poorly trained horse, used by the other girl for more showy but less dangerous feats than Polly's. "She's goin' through her regular turn with him. She's trying to break her neck," said Jim. "She wants to do it. It's your fault!" he cried, turning upon Douglas with bloodshot eyes. He was half insane. He cared little whom he wounded.

"Why can't we stop her?" cried Douglas, unable to endure the strain. He took one step inside the entrance.

"No, no; not that!" Jim dragged him back roughly. "If she sees you now it will be the end." They watched in silence. "She's over the first part," Jim whispered at last.

Douglas drew back, his muscles tense, as he watched the scene inside the ring. Eloise stood at the pastor's side, horror-stricken at Polly's reckless behavior. She knew Barbarian. It was easy to guess the end.

"She's comin' to the hoops," Jim whispered hoarsely.

"Barbarian don't know that part. I never trained him," the other girl said.

Polly made the first leap toward the hoops. The horse was not at fault; it was Polly. She plunged wildly. The audience started. She caught her footing with an effort. One, two, three hoops were passed. She threw herself across the back of the horse and hung head downward as he galloped around the ring. The band was playing loudly; the people were cheering. She rose to meet the last two hoops.

When the last wagon was beginning to climb the long, winding road of the moonlit hill Jim turned to Polly, who stood near the side of the deserted ring. His eyes traveled from her to the parson, who waited near her. She was in her street clothes now, the little brown Quakerish dress which she had chosen to wear so much since her return from the parsonage.

"I guess I won't be makin' no mistake this time," he said, and he placed her hand in that of the parson.

"Goodby, Murrer Jim," faltered Polly.

He stooped and touched her forehead with his lips. A mother's spirit breathed through his kiss.

"I'm glad it's like this," he said, then turned away and followed the long, dotted line of winding lights disappearing slowly over the hill.

Her eyes traveled after him. Douglas touched the cold little hand at her side.

"I belong with them," she said, still gazing after Jim and the wagons.

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